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ABSTRACT

In the 1980s females in America are permitted and even encouraged to participate in youth sports. This social phenomenon, however, is of recent vintage since most youth sports programs did not initially welcome girls' participation. Three major factors in girls not having been provided equal opportunities in sport are physiological differences in the sexes, societal norms and attitudes, and organizational rules and support. Although competition for girls was largely restricted until the 1960s, some sport participation did occur. Beginning in the 1960s attitudes began changing, since the existing golf, tennis, and field hockey tournaments had not harmed the participants physically or emotionally. While cultural attitudes have prevented many girls from eagerly pursuing sport, these too are changing. No longer are sport outcomes such as character development, social interaction skills, and enhanced self-worth thought to be appropriate only for boys. Organizational rules and support have determined what youth sport opportunities have existed for females, and since societal attitudes have traditionally encouraged sports for males, they invariably were the beneficiaries of the best programs. Most national youth sport organizations today no longer have restrictions about girls participating. The three reasons justifying the limitations placed on female participation in youth sport are no longer considered valid. (JMK)

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HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH SPORT

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> The highest development of the American woman cannot be attained without due regard to the preservation of physical activity and for that reason the practice of athletics is an essential for all ages. (deKoven, 1912, p. 149)

Finally in the 1980s females in America are permitted and even encouraged to participate in youth sports as this 1912 statement recommended. This social phenomenon, however, is certainly of recent vintage since most youth sport programs did not initially welcome girls' participation. In order to understand how and why such a change occurred, a historical perspective is needed. This paper will examine the three primary reasons why girls have not received equal opportunities in youth sports and explain why each reason is no longer valid.

The three major factors why girls have not been provided equal opportunities in sport are the physiological differences in the sexes, societal norms and attitudes, and organizational rules and support. Concerning the first, in the early 1900s medical doctors, with the support of most women including physical educators, repeatedly stressed that vigorous activity would harm females. Ethel Perrin (1928) agreed when she said,

> Girls are not suited for the same athletic programs as boys. The biological difference between them cannot be ignored unless we are willing to sacrifice our school girls on the altar of an Olympic spectacle. Under prolonged and intense strain a girl goes to pieces nervously. (p. 10)

Opponents of girls' competition stressed that it would endanger their reproductive organs, impede menstruation, and develop bulging muscles. Mabel Lee (1924) said girls and women would be apt to get more physical straining than physical training from sport competition.

In addition to the supposed physical risk, it was claimed that females were biologically incapable of many sport achievements. Ethel Perrin (1924) alleged that a girl may be

> so delicately and mysteriously put together that it is difficult to protect her from any possible chance of physical injury; that her nervous system is so easily disturbed that she should avoid all opportunities of hysterical disturbances, and that because she should preserve her inborn sense of modesty and innocence she must never be seen by the opposite sex when she is likely to forget herself. (p. 658)

The collapse of several of the female competitors in the 800-meters race at the 1928 Olympics reinforced this belief of their weak and delicate physical natures.

While competition was largely restricted at least until the 1960s, some sport participation occurred. Prior to the 1880s social gatherings for dancing, play activities, and games included girls (See Figure 1). Between 1880-1920 upper-class girls at social clubs were introduced to appropriate activities such as archery, croquet, golf, swimming, and tennis. Girls in schools, especially in rural areas, played basketball and sometimes engaged in field hockey and track and field events, too. Dr. Clelia Mosher (1925), however, summarized the prevailing opinions of the times when she praised the healthfulness of sport participation but urged females to use restraint. Similar philosophies prevailed in the various opportunities believed to be appropriate for girls. For example, the Girls Branch of the Public School Athletic League in New York City beginning in 1905 provided folk dancing as the after-school activity best suited to girls' interests and needs. School play days emphasizing social interaction more than sport competition were permitted, usually in urban schools, as long as they were supervised by women who ensured against overindulgence. Between 1920-1960 participation and having fun were encouraged while competition in championships were discouraged and even prohibited.

Beginning gradually in the 1960s attitudes began to change since the existing golf, tennis, and field hockey tournaments had not harmed the participants physically

or emotionally. The United States Olympic Development Committee through its National Institutes on Girls Sports between 1963-1969 encouraged girls to learn and to improve their sport skills. As Dudley Sargent (1915) analyzed,

> It took educators and biologists some little time . . . to realize that girls, also, had within them this dynamic force seeking more normal and healthy outlets than had been universally accorded to them in the past. Women themselves had been slow to realize this tremendous power and had constantly overestimated their weakness, so that it needed many years of encouragement and of feeling their way through the stages of musical calisthenics and bean-bag drills to convince them that they would not fall to pieces in more violent exercise. (p. 831)

No medical reasons justify that girls should be restricted from sport participation and competition because of the risk of physical or psychological harm. Rather, females have set records at all stages of their menstrual cycles, continued vigorous exercise throughout pregnancies, and won championships after having children. Both girls and boys benefit health-wise from sport when provided at the proper developmental level. Rather than being different, prepubescent girls and boys can fairly and safely compete against each other in all sports. Postpubescent girls should be provided separate sport programs because of physiological differences with boys. This should not be interpreted to mean that girls are inferior physically, just different. Dyer (1982) proposed that females' sport performances are rapidly improving and that it is not known what their potentials are.

Societal norms and attitudes have also played a vital role in determining which, how many, and the extent females have been involved in youth sport. Religious, economic, and political policies and attitudes have traditionally relegated females to a second-class status. Females have faced social barriers toward sport participation, too, since most Americans socialize girls and boys differently. Girls are expected to play with dolls and sedentary toys while boys are encouraged

to play rugged, aggressive sports outdoors. Parents, and especially fathers, teach their daughters and sons different motor skills. In elementary schools girls traditionally jump rope and play less competitive games in smaller groups while boys compete in larger groups with more rules and player interdependence (Lever, 1976 and 1978). Frequently pre-adolescent girls are allowed to be "tomboys", but in the junior high school years they are pressured by peers, parents, and teachers to assume their proper sport roles as cheerleaders on the sidelines. The few females who dare to challenge their exclusion from sport face a dilemma.

> Amongst the most incompatible roles at present are those of the female in society and the sportsperson . . . . In Western societies, the role for girls and women is a feminine one - gentle, unassuming, passive and inactive. But, in order to participate successfully in sport, females must possess a high degree of competitiveness, aggressiveness and achievement motivation. They must demonstrate endurance and be able to take risks. But these are very largely the traits which define the male role. Many adolescent girls find the conflict between the feminine and the sporting roles too difficult to handle and drop out of competitive sport. (Dyer, 1982, p. 38)

Since these values were attributed to males, if females persist in sport they risk receiving a non-feminine label and being ostracized socially. Eleanora Sears and Babe Didrikson may have ignored such attacks, while Helen Wills stressed feminine clothing and behavior. Those females who choose to engage in sport often yield to societal pressures by selecting an individual, non-contact sport because it was more acceptable and thus less threatening to their self-image.

While cultural attitudes have prevented many girls from eagerly pursuing sport, these are changing. No longer are sport outcomes such as character development, social interaction skills, and enhanced self-worth thought to be appropriate only for boys. Girls find sport just as challenging and as much fun as the

boys do. Mothers who in their youth were deprived of sport opportunities are now encouraging their daughters to get involved. Researchers are today questioning whether sport achievements can be attributed to biological factors or whether environmental factors such as experiences and societal attitudes may actually play a more influential role. Only time will answer this.

Organizational rules and support have determined what youth sport opportunities have existed for females. Seefeldt and Branta (1984) compared the participation rates of girls and boys by examining the rank order lists and frequency counts from five studies conducted between 1898-1978. Girls in the earlier studies listed a greater variety of play activities, such as dolls and dancing, than sports. Girls in the 1978 Michigan study ranked 12 individual sports in their top 20. This preference for individual sports was unique to the girls since the boys preferred more team sports. The 1978 report listed a 50% participation level for girls in 13 sports compared with the boys' 17 sports. In the 1898 study at least 25% of the girls played 1 sport while 80 years later this number had increased to 21 sports.

Since societal attitudes have traditionally encouraged sports for males, they invariably were the beneficiaries of the best programs. This left the girls with the smallest, oldest, and least-equipped facilities. Financial support for their sport programs was virtually non-existent, so they often raised money through the infamous bake sale. Shared sport programs relegated the girls to hand-me-down equipment and inconvenient practice and game schedules. While this insidious discrimination continued unquestioned, some females still persisted and achieved in sport.

At times, though, girls' programs were co-opted into the existing structure for boys' sport. For example, girls' high school basketball, popular in the 1920s in rural areas, was usually played with boys' rules and coached and officiated by males. The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) provided many of the early national cham-

pionships for females - swimming in 1916, track and field in 1923, and basketball in 1926 - but did so under male leadership. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFSHSA) was established in 1922 to supervise boys' interscholastic athletics. Although this organization did take over girls' programs, because of their insignificance compared with the boys' competitions, it published no female participation statistics until 1971. The National Federation like the AAU and other sport organizations illustrated male domination.

> The exclusion of women from team management and coaching positions is equally complete. Women held these positions in the early days of separate women's sports meetings, of course, but with development of joint organizations and joint meetings the number of women in positions of importance in this field declined into insignificance. (Dyer, 1982, p. 218)

While most national youth sport organizations have no restrictions about girls' participating, such was certainly not always the case. Little League Baseball began in 1939 for boys. Only after a 1973 lawsuit alleging discrimination were girls permitted to play. The ruling stated,

> It is my understanding that Little League Baseball is . . . as American as the hot dog and apple pie. There is no reason why that part of Americana should be withheld from little girls. The sooner little boys begin to realize that little girls are equal and that there will be many opportunities for a boy to be bested by a girl, the closer they will be to better mental health. (Dworkin, 1974, p. 20)

The Pony League in 1976 and the Babe Ruth League in 1984 responded by offering softball programs for girls, although girls could play baseball if they chose to join the boys. The All-American Soap Box Derby began in 1935 but did not allow girls to enter until 1971.

Participation as influenced by lingering societal attitudes, still heavily

favors the boys. For example, girls comprise between 36% for 10-to 11-year olds and 20% for 19-year olds [redacted] in Young American Bowling Alliance events. In 1982-1983 girls' participation in interscholastic athletics was 1,779,972 while the boys had twice that many involved. Of note, though, is that the girls' level of participation has actually declined since its peak of 2,083,040 in 1977-1978.

Whereas physiological differences, societal attitudes, and organizational restrictions limited females' involvement in youth sport, many changes have occurred. No longer are females thought to be harmed by competition. Instead they are participating earlier, playing varied sports, and progressing in skill development more rapidly. Society has seemingly approved females' competition in most sports. Parents encourage their daughters to seek fame and fortune by training to become professional athletes. Youth sport agencies, recreation departments, clubs, and schools provide opportunities on an equitable basis as parents refuse to accept program discrimination based on sex. Younger girls and boys frequently compete with and against each other. Thus, the three reasons justifying the limitations placed on female participation in youth sport are no longer valid. Maybe the historical perspective can best be summarized by the following notes exchanged by Janet and Richard in the "The Scuthpaw" (Viorst, 1974).

> Dear Richard: Don't invite me to your birthday party because I'm not coming. And give back the Disneyland sweatshirt I said you could wear. If I'm not good enough to play on your team, I'm not good enough to be friends with. Your former friend, Janet P.S. I hope when you go to the dentist he finds 20 cavities.
>
> Dear Janet: Here is your stupid Disneyland sweatshirt, if that's how you're going to be. I want my comic books now - finished or not. No girl has ever played on the Mapes Street baseball team, and as long as I'm captain, no girls ever will. Your former friend, Richard P.S.

I hope when you go for your checkup you need a tetanus shot.

Dear Richard: I'm changing my goldfish's name from Richard to Stanley. Don't count on my vote for class president next year. Just because I'm a member of the ballet club doesn't mean I'm not a terrific ball-player. Your former friend, Janet P.S. I see you lost your first game 28-0.

Dear Janet: I'm not saving any more seats for you on the bus. For all I care you can stand the whole way to school. Why don't you just forget about baseball and learn something nice like knitting. Your former friend, Richard P.S. Wait until Wednesday.

Dear Richard: My father said I could call someone to go with us for a ride and hot-fudge sundaes. In case you didn't notice, I didn't call you. Your former friend, Janet P.S. I see you lost your second game, 34-0.

Dear Janet: Remember when I took the laces out of my blue-and-white sneakers and gave them to you? I want them back. Your former friend, Richard P.S. Wait until Friday.

Dear Richard: Congratulations on your unbroken record. Eight straight losses. Wow: I understand you're the laughing stock of New Jersey. Your former friend, Janet P.S. Why don't you and your team forget about baseball and learn something nice like knitting maybe?

Dear Janet: Here's the silver horseback riding trophy that you gave me. I don't think I want to keep it anymore. Your former friend, Richard P.S. I didn't think you'd be the kind who'd kick a man when he's down.

Dear Richard: I wasn't kicking exactly I was kicking <u>back</u>. Your former friend, Janet P.S. In case your were wondering my batting average is .345.

Dear Janet: Alfie is having his tonsils out tomorrow. We might be able to let you catch next week. Richard

Dear Richard: I pitch. Janet

Dear Janet: Joel is moving to Kansas and Danny sprained his wrist. How about a permanent place in the outfield? Richard

Dear Richard: I pitch. Janet

Dear Janet: Ronnie caught the chicken pox and Leo broke his toe and Elwood has these stupid violin lessons. I'll give you first base, and that's my final offer. Richard

Dear Richard: Susan Reilly plays first base, Marilyn Jackson catches, Ethel Kahn plays center field, I pitch. It's a package deal. Janet

P.S. Sorry about your 12-game losing streak.

Dear Janet: Please! Not Marilyn Jackson. Richard

Dear Richard: Nobody ever said that I was unreasonable. How about Lizzie Matindale instead? Janet

Dear Janet: At least could you call your goldfish Richard again? Your friend, Richard. (pp. 71-74)

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HISTORICAL ERAS OF FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH SPORT

Years	Pre-1880s	1880-1920	1920-1960	1960-1984
Participants	A. Upper-class B. Other classes	A. Upper-class B. Other classes	A. All classes B. All classes C. Upper-class	A. All classes B. All classes C. Upper-class
Sponsoring Organizations	A. Homes and social occasions B. Homes	A. Social clubs B. Schools, especially in rural areas	A. Schools B. Public programs C. Private clubs	A. Schools B. Public programs C. Private clubs
Sports	A. Dancing and play B. Play and work-related recreation	A. Archery, croquet, golf, swimming, and tennis B. Basketball, field hockey, and track and field	A. Play days under women's leadership in urban schools and teams coached by men in rural schools in basketball, field hockey, and track and field B. Basketball, bowling, softball, and track and field C. Golf, swimming, and tennis	A. Competitive teams in sports from archery to volleyball B. Recreation leagues, agencies for youth sport, and sport camps in most sports C. Resident sport schools to private lessons in chosen sport
Motivations	A. Socialization B. Fun	A. Socialization and pleasure B. Health, socialization, and fun	A. Participation for all in play days and competition for the highly skilled on teams B. Competitive although limited opportunities C. Some competitive events with social values stressed	A. Increasingly more competitive. B. Play, fun, and competition C. Competition and success

* Presented at the AAHPERD Convention on March 31, 1984, by Angela Lumpkin, Department of Physical Education, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27514